

The Stuff that Dreams are Made Of

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on December 19, 2021
Friendship Presbyterian Church

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

*"Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel,"
which means, 'God is with us.'"*

When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus. (Matthew 1:18-25, NRSV)

When you sleep, do you often dream? And if you do, do you remember your dreams? I know for me, my dreams are usually very ordinary, sometimes bizarre, randomly patched together vignettes of places and faces. I usually can recall some things when I first wake up, but then as the day rolls on, I lose more and more of my hold on whatever my dreams were, to the point that I only remember THAT I dreamed, but little content.

It's this tendency for our dreams to fade in the light of day, that for millennia they have been used as a metaphor for that which is insubstantial, passing, even meaningless. This fact was famously memorialized in the classic 1941 film noir *The Maltese Falcon*, starring Humphrey Bogart as private detective Sam Spade. At the very end, the police Sergeant asks Sam about the heavy, black statuette of a falcon that was the cause of all the mystery and murder – a *fake* of a missing priceless original:

"Heavy," the Sergeant says. "What is it?"

With deep pain in his eyes, Sam looks at the woman whom he had come to love, but whom he had found was guilty of murder, and replies to the Sergeant, "The stuff that dreams are made of."

This line stands out because it was not in the original book on which the movie was otherwise very faithfully based. Bogart suggested the line, thereby transforming the black bird statuette from a mere plot device into an allusion to Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, in which one of the characters wraps up the play with these memorable words:

*Our revels now are ended. These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits, and
Are melted into air, into thin air:
And like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yeah, all that it inherit, shall dissolve,
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
as dreams are made on ...*

The characters and scenery, we're told, all evaporate when the play ends because they are literally made of nothing, and they fade into nothing. And ultimately, so does the audience. Like the stuff of the play, we too will vanish, leaving not a wisp behind, for "We are such stuff as dreams are made on." Dreams fade, and so do all things. And so do we.

And yet, for all this, somehow, we may intuit that our dreaming ... our capacity to dream ... the mysterious world of images and themes and voices revealed in our dreams ... point to something *more*, more than just fading shadows. For all the dreams that we do forget, that do fade, how many of you have been *changed* by a dream you had, or inspired, or through a dream, you even feel that you gained new insight into the world or into yourself? It hasn't happened often, but I *know* that I have, and I can't believe that I'm unusual this way.

In the Bible, dreams are often an occasion for revelation from the world of Spirit – whether of instruction, or warning, or insight, or even the shape of things to come.

Dreams came to the patriarch Jacob, as in his dream of the stairway reaching up to Heaven, with the angels of God ascending and descending on it, which then is fulfilled later in his experience of wrestling with God in the darkness of the night, through which he is re-named and given a new identity as *Israel* – as one who struggles with God and man and prevails.

Dreams came to Jacob's son Joseph as he lived out his most improbable life as one betrayed by his brothers and sent to Egypt as a slave, but who would in the mysterious providence of God rise to become the 2nd most powerful man in Egypt, be re-united with his father and brothers, and save them all from starvation in the midst of famine.

Dreams came to Daniel, the exile to Babylon, who showed imperial lords the stuff of their own dreams: Things that would come to pass ... the rise and fall of kingdoms ... and the ultimate victory of a *divine* Kingdom that would never pass away.

And as we see today, dreams also came to *another* Joseph, a carpenter betrothed to one named Mary.

Today, we have finally reached the fourth Sunday of Advent and are nearly at Christmas Eve! We have heard Jesus' warning to open our eyes, to "be ready" for signs of the Kingdom, and we have heard John the Baptist's call to repentance, that we might truly hear and see the Christmas message in a new, unexpected light ... that we might "see again as for the first time." We have been introduced to the young Mary, soon to be the mother of Jesus, and found her to be a passionate visionary of God's future.

And now, we meet Joseph. In meeting him, we are reminded that the preparations for the first Christmas were anything but conventional and were far, far from "proper." The text tells us that Joseph was engaged to Mary, but before they lived together as husband and wife, she was found to be with child. The narrator knows that the child has come to be through the mysterious work of the Holy Spirit, but the characters in the story have yet to be let in on the secret.

We are told that Joseph is a "righteous" man, which at minimum means he is deeply concerned to follow and keep the Mosaic Law. And here's the problem: To Joseph, the pregnancy itself is a violation of that Law ... a violation of all social convention and morality for an unmarried woman.

If we knew nothing of this story and stopped here, but did know something about how people do "righteousness," we might assume that Joseph would judge her guilty and throw her to the legal wolves ... that he would bring her up on charges as the ancient law would allow. As we see, however, this isn't what happens at all.

Even though Joseph does not yet understand what amazing things are afoot, his "righteousness" consists not in judgment but in *mercy*, in an unwillingness to punish Mary, even though she was – at least as far as *he* knew – apparently guilty of adultery. And so, in his eyes, the marriage *cannot* go forward, but he is prepared to simply end the engagement quietly and spare her public shaming.

But then something happens – *Joseph falls asleep!* And when he sleeps, at least this time, he *dreams*. And in his dream, an angel appears to him and tells him not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife, for the child she is carrying is not – as *some* would have said – a mistake, or a sin, or an abomination, but a miracle of God, and a very special miracle at that: A son who is destined to save his people from their sins. What some would have seen as a moral outrage is in fact a holy disruption. The child in Mary's womb is not a violation of God's will, but the ultimate *expression* of it, a true gift of the Holy Spirit!

Now, that's no ordinary dream! And neither were the ones that followed, warning Joseph to take his family and escape Bethlehem as the madness of King Herod surged, and then to return when it was safe. Through them, Joseph perceived that something special was happening, that the world was turning, even if the joy would be inextricably mixed with tragedy ... and that the

world would never be the same again. Most dreams fade in the light of day, but sometimes, dreams prophesy into being a *new day* ... new beginnings ... new life.

Some folks are quite taken with the idea of *interpreting* dreams, and there's enough in Freud and Jung and their ilk to keep the analysts busy, but I think the great lesson of our dreams and our dreaming is not the possibility of sure knowledge but a reminder of how the soul grows and lives into its mystery. The important thing is not what you do to a dream, but what a dream does to you.

As author Frederick Buechner memorably put it, "The tears of [some] dreams can be real enough to wet the pillow and the passions of them fierce enough to make the flesh burn. There are times we dream our way to a truth or an insight so overwhelming that it startles us awake and haunts us for years to come."

I know from my own life that this is true. I've told you all of a dream I had when I was about 16 years old, in which I'm trying to scale the high dome of an old Byzantine church in what I know in my dream to be old Constantinople ... modern day Istanbul. The dome is light red stone, but covered in moss, and so just as I am able to raise myself a foot, I slide back. I don't know that I make any progress – all I know is that I am desperate to reach the top. I don't know what is to be found there, but something drives me forward.

It was the most compelling dream I have ever had. I even wrote a poem inspired by it the next day – the only dream I've ever had that inspired *that!* It got published in my high school's literary magazine. It was no great work, but several people asked me about it – what it was about. And I told them about the dream.

Twenty years later, I was trying to make my way following a divorce, and was unpacking some boxes that had not been opened in years. I opened one, not knowing what I'd find inside, only to discover high school memorabilia ... old report cards, some textbooks, some pictures, and a copy of that literary magazine. I picked it up and started to thumb through it, remembering that I had submitted some poems. And then I saw it ... for the first time in twenty years, I saw it ... the poem that brought back for me that dream. I started to cry, as the great hurt in my life met and embraced the longing of that climb.

It was only *one week later* that I received a fateful phone call – the one in which I was invited to join a tour group going to Turkey, at no cost to me, beginning and ending in ... *Istanbul*. By now, many of you know the significance of that trip – it was on that trip that I met my Lisa. While of course I had no idea at the time of the invitation what this trip would come to mean, I did have a deep sense that I was *meant* to go ... that my dream, and the re-discovery of the poem twenty years later, and now *this ... all were connected*.

I could *feel* the winds of the Spirit blowing over the wreckage of my life, impelling me towards a purpose. I had no idea what was out there or even what I was looking for, but I knew in my

heart that I was becoming a pilgrim on a pilgrimage, one which would marry my deepest pain to my highest hopes, all driven by a Divine Mystery which I couldn't deny.

Yes, God's spirit can speak to us in many ways, and sometimes that language is the language of dreams. Often the words and lessons are coming in other ways, and whether in dreams or not, they can be hard to hear or understand. There is, no doubt, so much that we miss. But Joseph was listening and able to hear on one fateful night. Through that dream, Joseph came to understand that he – and Mary – were exactly where they were meant to be, and they were being called to walk, together, into the sheer impossibility of what was happening to them ... and *in* them, and *around* them. Salvation was unfolding before their very eyes!

Years later, the movement that was made possible by Joseph and Mary's receptivity and obedience would be born. On the Day of Pentecost, that first community of Jesus followers is filled with the Holy Spirit, and the "Rock," Simon Peter, stands up to declare what God was doing in the wake of Jesus' Resurrection, a movement so irresistible that it was foreseen by the prophet Joel hundreds of years before:

Then afterwards

*I will pour out my spirit on all flesh;
your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
your old [...] shall dream dreams,
and your young [...] shall see visions (Joel 2:28-29, NRSV)*

And this Dream lives on, because it is *God's* Dream. Salvation is afoot! The world *is* turning! Christmas is almost here ... the Child is soon to be born. With eyes opened to see, we understand that all this is *real*, and *true*, and is *always true*, for *this is* the stuff that dreams are made of.

To the glory of God. Amen.